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Deathless Aspiration: The Resurgent Heroines of Staël and Rossetti

Female authors of the Romantic and Victorian eras contested a pervasive assumption that their work was intrinsically unintellectual and melodramatic.  In response, radical writers assertively set fire to conventional wisdom regarding these perceived limitations to claim an inheritance of literary merit in a skeptical patriarchal discipline. These ambitions are mirrored in a pattern of female figures that forcefully engage language to generate a legacy of rejuvenation. Like their creators, these protagonists assume the character of the phoenix, embracing the destruction of self to provide life for something regenerated and even sublime. Tracing the manifestations of this motif in Madam de Staël’s *Corinne, or Italy* and Christina Rossetti’s poem “The Convent Threshold” provides a provocative pairing of heroines whose will ascends triumphant from the ashes of earth-bound restraints.

**I. *Corrine, or Italy*: The Diviner Restored**

Although quiet, concluding dignity surpasses even her early glory, Staël introduces Corinne in a flourish of grandiose genius. Curious about elation in the Italian capital, Nelvil is told that “the most famous woman in Italy… and one of the most beautiful women in Rome, was to be crowned” (21).  While her aesthetic intellect will be the eventual focus, this Sibyl’s beautiful song is preceded by a thick paragraph describing her vibrant plumage - the Indian turban, black hair, blue stole, and beguiling smile. Shortly thereafter Count d’Erfeuil attempts his own diagnosis of her splendor, calling Corinne “rich, young, and free” and wryly speculating that “it is possible that in this country she has not met a man worthy of her” (37).  If we are to properly grieve at the decline that follows, this initial pinnacle of talent and potential must extend beyond imagination, and it does. Corinne cannot be measured by the existing standards, as d’Erfeuil admits: “She has such a superior mind, such deep learning, such delicate tact, that ordinary rules for judging women cannot be applied to her” (47).  As Gretchen Rous Besser has pointed out, the opening scene lives little doubt that Corinne and Staël share an intention to “shake the foundations of patriarchy by aspiring to literary glory” (86). If any reader or critic dares doubt the interpretive or inventive power of the female voice, Staël kicks off with a coronation of the indisputable talent she and her creation share in equal measure. From the start, Corinne’s proto-feminism was perceived as a revolutionary flame best kept a safe distance from impressionable female readers.  Harvard professor Perry Miller stated that the novel “was perpetually denounced from Middle-class pulpits and assiduously read by middle-class daughters in their chambers at night” (qtd. in Riess 816).

To position Corinne as a phoenix figure, her agency in decline and resurrection must be proven in equal measure. From her initial infatuation forward, Corinne monitors her emotions with a precise internal Richter scale and claims ownership of her decisions. She chooses to allow her passion for Oswald guide her actions, fully aware that this affection will threaten her artistic brilliance. When Nelvil avoids her briefly after a magnetic first impression, her prophetic response is painfully accurate: “I was born for happiness.... but pain… can disturb my reason and cause my death…. within my heart there are depths of sadness from which I can defend myself only by shielding myself from love” (75).  This knowledge prohibits the image of a female character (or author) whose intellect is overwhelmed by tidal waves of passion; Corinne may be a flawed captain, but she consistently steers her own ship.

Her premonitions materialize as Corinne finds herself “dominated by her love for Oswald” and confesses to Nelvil a fear that “the feeling you arouse in me is to absorb every other interest and every other thought” (89). This determined self-awareness is difficult to interpret. Staël refuses to allow Corinne to be framed as a victim - she purposefully rejects the emotional detachment required to mute her response to Oswald.  Cognizant of the dangers, she opts for vulnerable engagement over sterile distance, risk over retreat. It is painful to see such a splendid character idolize a clay-footed figure whose limitations seem both obvious and destructive.  Perhaps that is the point - unlike Oswald, Corinne is not beholden to the judgment offered by Mr. Edgermond, Count d’Erfeuil, Victor’s father, the reader, or even her own censorious instincts. Staël recounts that “Corinne made herself [Nelvil’s] slave” (122); she alone is allowed the agency to place those shackles on her heart and mind.